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Alexander Piatigorsky: Buddhism as Object and Approach

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Alexander Moseevich Piagitorsky (1929–2009) was a philosopher, linguist, scholar of Tamil literature and Buddhist thought, and fiction writer. His wide-ranging work is situated across several genres, from scholarly studies to philosophical novels, and addresses an expansive array of topics, including Buddhist philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, semiotics, and literary theory, as well as more episodic works on totalitarianism, psychoanalysis, and Russian literature. Piatigorsky was a faculty member at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) from his emigration in the mid-1970s until his death in 2009, making him one of few late-Soviet philosophers with a substantial publication output in English. And yet there is still relatively little secondary scholarship on Piatigorsky written in any language, further adding to the challenge of interpreting his already difficult body of work. Though he lived in the U.K. for over three decades, after his death *The Guardian* published an obituary saying that few of his SOAS colleagues "would have guessed that this was a man who was widely considered to be one of the more significant thinkers of the age and Russia's greatest philosopher."[1] Piatigorsky was indeed part of a prolific group of philosophers who came of intellectual age in the post-Stalin years, but like many émigré thinkers of that era, his transnational status meant that his work has been understudied both in Russia and abroad.

A central theme in Piatigorsky's work is the problem of "thinking." Like his contemporary and collaborator, Merab Mamardasvhili (1930–1990), Piatigorsky developed a philosophy of "thinking about thinking" that guided his philosophical and philological approach. On the one hand, much of Piatigorsky's work from his pre-emigration period can be productively viewed within the context of ongoing debates in the philosophy of mind and semiotics among thinkers like Mamardashvili, David Zilberman (1938–1977), and Iurii Lotman (1922–1993). And yet, on the other hand, what distinguishes Piatigorsky's work from his Soviet contemporaries, and what

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1 Tudor Parfitt, "Alexander Piatigorsky Obituary," *The Guardian* (January 5, 2010), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/05/alexander-piatigorsky-obituary, last accessed 7 October 2024.

makes his thinking especially relevant today, is its rootedness in the Soviet-Buddhist context, and his belief that answers to the most pressing questions of phenomenological inquiry, and of philosophy in general, can be found in the foundational texts and ideas of Buddhist thought, thereby positioning his work at the intersection of east and west in late Soviet discourse. Moreover, Piatigorsky was not just writing about Buddhism; his work was rooted in philological readings of Buddhist texts, in his own practice of Buddhism, and in conversations with indigenous Buddhist scholars like Bidia Dandaron, as well as Russia-based Buddhologists in Moscow and beyond. Buddhist texts were his objects of study, but Buddhist philosophy also served as inspiration for his philosophical approach, thereby setting his work apart from his contemporaries engaged in similar investigations into the philosophy of mind.

The breadth of Piatigorsky's scholarly interests, as well as the multiple genres in which he worked, make it impossible to do justice to the full scope of his thought in any single article. Thus, here I will focus on the concepts of thinking, observation, and interpretation in Piatigorsky's work, with the aim of elucidating the space he carves out for Buddhist insights in each. In particular, I rely on *Thinking and Observation* (*Myshlenie i nabliudenie*), published in 2002 but based on conversations with David Zilberman from the late 1960s and early 1970s. I end by addressing Piatigorsky's essay on "Philosophy of Literary Criticism" from 1980, where he rebukes Russian literary-philosophical culture for deploying essentialist narratives to assert its dominance as the sole cultural position, rather than as one among many. Piatigorsky's work not only contributes to a more robust picture of Buddhist scholarship and the Buddhist perspective in late Soviet thought, but his approach offers an alternative to the dominant narratives of his historical moment by directing focus away from the center and towards the periphery—both methodologically and geographically.

Intellectual Roots: East and West

Piatigorsky's intellectual training was formed at the intersection of developing notions of "east" and "west" within Moscow philosophical debates of Thaw-era philosophy. The most significant early influence on Piatigorsky's work was preeminent linguist, ethnographer, and scholar of Tibetan culture and language Iurii Rerikh (1902–1960), son of painter, writer, and mystic Nikolai Rerikh (1874–1947). Rerikh was educated at the University of London, Harvard, and the University of Paris; throughout the 1920s and 1930s he participated in expeditions (sometimes together with his father) through Central Asia, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, and China. He arrived in the Soviet Union in 1957 and took up the directorship of the Department of the History and Philosophy of India at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR,

where he nurtured the study of eastern cultures, languages, and religion within the Soviet academy, and in particular Tibetan Buddhism, which included publishing a multi-volume Tibetan-Russian-English dictionary and being the first person to teach Sanskrit at a Soviet university. When Rerikh arrived at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Piatigorsky was already involved in research on Hindu philosophy and Tamil literature, and in 1962 the latter defended his *kandidatskaia* dissertation, *From the History of Medieval Tamil Literature* (*Iz istorii srednevekovoi tamil'skoi literatury*).

Piatigorsky spent three years studying and working with Rerikh, crediting him for developing his knowledge of Buddhism—not just of Buddhist texts, but of Buddhism as a way of thinking. Tibet, being the shared spiritual tradition for the Kalmyks, the Buryats, and the Tuva,[2] likewise sat at the center of the early Soviet study of Buddhism, both among Rerikh's circle and in the work of his predecessor, the Sanskrit scholar Fedor Shcherbatskoi (1866–1942). Piatigorsky referred to Rerikh as his "teacher of thought" (*uchitel' duman'ia*)—a specialist who, as Piatigorsky explained, "attuned [his] inner sense of hearing, set the tone for [his] thought."[3] Later he said of his teacher: "he was not a 'dissertation on Buddhism,' he himself was Buddhism."[4] Piatigorsky describes how he gained from Rerikh a Buddhist cosmological understanding of ontology and morality, whereby an amoral action not only causes harm to an individual, but contributes to the degradation of the entire cosmos.[5] As we will see, a distinguishing feature of Piatigorsky's work is his focus on textual analysis, including the hermeneutical study of what he calls "*facts* taken from certain Buddhist texts" [emphasis in original], thereby emphasizing the importance of the philological content of Buddhist literature in philosophical context. In *Materials on the History of Indian Philosophy* (*Materialy po istorii indiiskoi filosofii*, 1962), for instance, Piatigorsky undertakes a rigorous analysis of ways of knowing in the Tamil-Buddhist epic *Maṇimēkalai*, compete with translations of the text, arguing that the gnoseological teachings in the *Maṇimēkalai* should be viewed as a distinct form of philosophical knowledge worthy of scholarly attention."[6] Perhaps Piatigorsky's rigorous text-based approach in his early

2 See Andrey Terentyev, "Tibetan Buddhism in Russia," *The Tibet Journal* 21:3 (1996), p. 60.

3 Iu. Iu. Budnikova, "Uchenik Iu.N. Rerikha Vostokoved Aleksandr Moiseevich Piatigorskii," SPBGU Musei-Institut Sem'i Rerikhov (December 6, 2009), https://web.archive.org/web/20121120023541/http://www.roerich.spb.ru/article/uchenik-yun-reriha-vostokoved-aleksandr-moiseevich-pyatigorskiy, last accessed 7 October 2024; see also Aleksandr Piatigorskii, "Effekt Iu.N. Rerikha." YouTube.com (Oct. 25, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3anPbZt1Js, last accessed 7 October 2024.

4 Iu. Iu. Budnikov, "A. M. Piatigorskii o Iu. N. Rerikhe: 'On byl ne 'dissertatsiei o buddizme,' on sam byl budizmom," LiveJournal, https://yasko.livejournal.com/429388.html, last accessed 7 October 2024.

5 Piatigorskii, "Effekt Iu. B. Rerikha."

6 Aleksandr Piatigorskii, *Materialy po istorii indiiskoi filosofii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury, 1962), p 60.

work might be a methodological nod to Rerikh, whom Danila Zakharov credits with the development of a "theoretical-methodological foundation for the study and hermeneutical analysis" of Buddhist texts.[7]

The year 1960 marked a watershed for the study of Eastern cultures and languages, ushering in a decade of flourishing for the discipline of Oriental Studies (*vostokovedenie*) within the Soviet academy. As Svetlana Mesyats and Mikhail Egorochkin have shown, prior to that decade, philosophical research on eastern philosophies and philosophers was considered superfluous within the broader matrix of Soviet philosophical research. The year 1960 saw the establishment of a Department for Eastern Philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the publication by Piatigorsky (co-authored with Semen Rudin) of the first Tamil-Russian dictionary.[8] Importantly, before his death in 1960, Rerikh revived the *Bibliotheca Buddhica* series, originally founded in 1897 by Semen Ol'denburg (1862–1934) at the original Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg—a city that, incidentally, holds the distinction of being the first European capital to build a Buddhist temple.[9] In its original iteration, the series was closed by the RAN Presidium in 1937, at the height of a wave of repressions against indigenous Buddhists in Russia.[10] As Konstantin Maksimov notes, Soviet efforts in the 1930s to eradicate local religions and cultures targeted Lamaism and Buddhism in particular: "temples were closed, sacred objects, ancient church manuscripts, and books were destroyed, precious stones were handed over to the economic department of the OGPU-NKVD of the USSR."[11] Buddhologist and translator Andrei Terent'ev writes that of the 175 Buddhist temples in Russia in 1917, by 1940 all had been destroyed.[12] Rerikh, and Piatigorsky in his footsteps, played an important role in the move to reintroduce *vostokovedenie*, in general, and the

7 D. S. Zakharov, "Spetsifika vozrozhdeniia otechestvennoi buddologii vo vtoroi polovine XX veka," *Nauchnaia mysl' Kavkaza* 4 (2014), p. 68.

8 Svetlana V. Mesyats and Mikhail V. Egorochkin, "After the Eclipse: History of Philosophy in Russia," *Studies in East European Thought* (2014), p. 219.

9 Anna Bernstein, "Buddhist Revival in Buriatia: Recent Perspectives," *Mongolian Studies* 25 (2002), p. 2.

10 Mesyats and Egorochkin, pp. 218–219.
In 2018, the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts at the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences made all publications of Bibliotheca Buddhica series available in digital form, at http://www.orientalstudies.ru/rus/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=7210, last accessed 7 October 2024.

11 Konstantin N. Maksimov, *Kalmykia in Russia's Past and Present National Policies and Administrative System* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), p. 260.

12 Andrey Terentyev, "Tibetan Buddhism in Russia," *The Tibet Journal* 21:3 (1996), p. 60. On the history of Buddhism in Russia, see, for instance, Ekaterina Safronova, "Sovremennyi buddizm v Rossii kak chast' buddiiskoi tsivillizatsii," *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhem* 27:1 (2009), pp. 73–79.

study of Buddhism, in particular, into national philosophical conversation by way of the Moscow academies.

And indeed, Piatigorsky's work was, in many ways, informed by the Moscow intellectual environment in which he was trained. From the 1960s until his emigration in 1974, Piatigorsky was part of a network of young, innovative philosophers who had been trained in their fields during the (relative) freedom of the immediate post-Stalin period of the Thaw, on the one hand, and who had also learned to work within the subsequent restrictions on intellectual activity that returned with Brezhnev's Stagnation, on the other. Piatigorsky collaborated with Mamardashvili on *Symbol and Consciousness* (*Simvol i soznanie*, 1982), which developed out of conversations the two philosophers had in the early 1970s. He was likewise connected to Lotman's work at Tartu State University, including publishing in the inaugural issue (1968) of *Trudy po vostokovedeniiu*, as well as giving a co-authored lecture with Lotman on "Text and Function" ("Tekst i funktsiia") in the same year. In the 1960s Piatigorsky also participated in meetings of Iurii Levada's (1930–2006) seminars; it was during these meetings that Piatigorsky began discussing with another seminar participant, the philosopher and Indiologist David Zilberman, what Piatigorsky would later develop as his theory of observational philosophy.[13] Alongside all this, Piatigorsky studied Sanskrit with Oktiabrina Volkova (1926–1988), whose Moscow apartment, "according to the recollections of contemporaries, was for many years the main Buddhist center of Moscow."[14]

All of this was happening in Moscow, but it would be a mistake to treat the revival of Soviet Buddhology as a purely "western" phenomenon. A significant influence on Piatigorsky in this period was the indigenous Buddhist practitioner, scholar, Buryat spiritual leader, and eventual political prisoner Bidia Dandaron (1914–1974). In his work on Dandaron, Mikhail Nemtsev describes how, "beginning in the mid-1960s, young people from all over the USSR began to visit Dandaron in search of Buddhist instruction," forming an informal circle of followers and disciples known as "Dandaron's Sangha."[15] Piatigorsky too traveled to Ulan-Ude to meet Dandaron, and Morozova recalls that when Dandaron visited Moscow on business in 1965, he stayed at

13 In 1976, after both Piatigorsky and Zilberman had emigrated from the Soviet Union, they co-authored an article on semiotics in India in the journal *Semiotica*. See A. M. Piatigorsky and D. B. Zilberman, "The Emergence of Semiotics in India: Some Approaches to Understanding Laksana in Hindu and Buddhist Philosophical Usages," *Semiotica* 17:3 (1976), pp. 255–265.

14 M. B. Morozova, "Tragediia Bidii Dandarona kak otrazhenie sud'by buddizma v Rossii posle natsiona'noi katastrofy 1917 goda," *Vestnik Sviato-Filaretskogo instituta* 18 (2016), p. 105.

15 Mikhail Nemtsev, "Bidia Dandaron," *Filosofia: An Encyclopedia of Russian Thought*, https://filosofia.dickinson.edu/encyclopedia/dandaron-bidia/, last accessed 7 October 2024. See also Morozova, "Tragediia," p. 106.

Piatigorsky's apartment.[16] Zakharov calls Dandaron "the most important Buddhist religious figure in post-war USSR," noting the way he was able to synthesize the Buddhist worldview and the western scientific tradition.[17] Importantly, Nemtsev clarifies how, when Dandaron talked about "westerners," he meant not only followers of Buddhist teaching from abroad, but also Soviet citizens of non-Buryat origin. Piatigorsky recalled that Dandaron "liked to say that it's not they who are traveling to him in Ulan Ude, but that Buddhism is traveling to the West."[18] Dandaron advocated for the inclusion of such "westerners" in his teaching as, in Nemtsev's words, a "necessary step for the development of Buddhism in contemporary times."[19]

Dandaron's view of the relationship between "east" and "west" in the reception of Soviet Buddhism is helpful not only for understanding Danaron's thought, but for shedding light on Piatigorsky's own positioning at his historical moment. If the 1960s was a renaissance for the Soviet study of Buddhism, then Dandaron's final arrest in 1972 and death in the Vydrino prison camp in Buryatia in 1974 marked an end to the flourishing of Buddhist topics and scholarship of the previous decade. In 1974 Piatigorsky emigrated and eventually took a position as a faculty member at SOAS in London, where he continued developing not only his personal Buddhist spiritual practice but also his intentional and committed return to Buddhist texts as sites of philosophical experience, most notably in *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought: Essays in Interpretation*, which was published in English in 1984 and translated into Russian in 2020. However, as was the case in many scholarly disciplines, it was only in the 1990s that studies of Buddhist philosophy, ranging from its history to metaphysics, began to be published regularly and widely in Russia.

Thinking about Thinking and Thinking as Text

A guiding idea of Piatigorsky's philosophical approach is *thinking* (*myshlenie*), as the center concept around which philosophical reflection and philological analysis hinges. Piatigorsky highlights that there is an intrinsic paradox to the study of thinking, since it can never become the object of its own observation: we can try to think about thinking but can ultimately never grasp thinking as an object of thinking, but only as thinking about thinking.[20] Here we find resonances with Mamardashvili's work on consciousness, where consciousness

16 Morozova, "Tragediia," p. 105.

17 Zakharov, "Spetsifika," p. 68.

18 Aleksandr Piatigorskii, "Ukhod Dandarona. Reministsentsiia," AlexanderPiatigorsky.com, https://alexanderpiatigorsky.com/ru/teksty/knigi/filosofskie-i-buddologicheskie-knigi/izbrannyie-stati-po-indologii-i-buddologii/uhod-dandarona/, last accessed 15 May 2024.

19 Nemtsev, "Bidia Dandaron."

20 Aleksandr Piatigorskii, *Myshlenie i nabliudenie. Chetyre lektsii po observatsionnoi filosofii* (Riga: Liepnieks & Ritups, 2002), p. 28.

always eludes the one who is conscious and can never be reflected upon as the object of its own reflection. Piatigorsky spoke on the non-objectness of thinking during a lecture, when he asked his audience to stop and try to think about their own thinking.

> In asking you to try to think about your thinking, I am simply suggesting that you substitute the object of your thinking. In fact, any attempt to think about one's (about your or my) thinking is an attempt to substitute the object of thinking. What could be easier! But in reality, it turns out that this is almost impossible to do.[21]

Not only can thinking not be "caught," but thinking about thinking never happens spontaneously or involuntarily.[22] In order to access thinking, thus, we must do so as an intentional practice, and from some third position—one that allows for reflection upon the subjective stance, according to which thinking can never be separated from the thinker.[23]

For Piatigorsky, this external stance is where philosophy comes in: "the philosopher applies thinking to thinking."[24] Philosophy engages thinking, or thinking about thinking, in what he calls "reflection" (*reflektsiia*), or "thinking that thinks about itself."[25] Just like the eye cannot see the act of vision or the ear cannot hear the act of hearing, Piatigorsky argues that we should "consider reflection a *phenomenon*, and thinking an *epiphenomenon* of reflection" [emphasis in original].[26] In her work on Mamardashvili, Diana Gasparyan aptly illustrates *how* for the philosopher, consciousness is best "described as a certain how than as a certain *what*."[27] For Piatigorsky, thinking is that very *how*, and is always an act of reflexive effort: "it cannot be spontaneous or involuntary—this is not to say anything definite about this kind of thinking, for the task itself here is again formulated psychologically, that is, in terms of thinking as an object, and not in terms of thinking that thinks about thinking as an object."[28] While Mamardashvili was concerned primarily with the analysis of *consciousness* as the primary object and site of philosophical analysis, Piatigorsky focuses a similar attention on the mechanisms of *thought*. Consciousness for Piatigorsky is not a synonym for thinking; consciousness exists in relation to thinking, but unlike thinking is not an intentional act; consciousness can be attributed and stand in relation to its objects, but "is not derived from thinking and cannot be reduced to it."[29]

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21 Ibid., p. 6.
22 Ibid., p. 7.
23 Ibid., p. 8.
24 Ibid., p. 2.
25 Ibid., p. 29.
26 Ibid., p. 29.
27 Diana Gasparyan, *The Philosophic Path of Merab Mamardashvili* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 31.
28 Piatigorskii, *Myshlenie i nabliudenie*, p. 7.
29 Ibid., p. 55.

Piatigorsky's writing style, likewise, can be understood in the context of his philosophy of thinking. His published work, some of which was originally conceived as lecture series, is conversational but structured, dense but not overly technical, and lacking direct citations. In the opening lecture of his *What is Political Philosophy?* series from 2006, Piatigorsky explains why he rarely cites other thinkers:

> After all, it is a real honor for a thinker to be quoted and cited—it means that he already lives in other thinkings [*v drugikh myshleniiakh*]. For this reason, everything that I quote, I quote already as a reflection that I have assimilated into my own thought.[30]

Piatigorsky's view of thinking extends to the broader network of intellectual interactions: when one thinker incorporates another's ideas, these thoughts take on new life in the thinking of the other. In the case of his citation of Buddhist texts, he notes: "A reference to anything—to an author, an idea, or a circumstance—is for me a specific node of the thinking of another within my 'topic field,' so to speak."[31] This approach lends Piatigorsky's work a fluid and erudite style, but can make it challenging to distinguish his ideas from the ideas of others.

If true external observation of thinking is impossible, then thinking can only be observed through the observation of objects and thinking about them.[32] Piatigorsky called this "observational philosophy," the seed of which we can trace back to his conversations with Zilberman in the late 1960s and early 1970s, surrounding an insight they initially called "observational psychology" (*nabliudatel'naia psikhologiia*). Observational philosophy was not a method, but was the object itself: in other words, is not a method that we apply to thinking or to objects but is itself the very object of thinking.[33]

> After all, the very name of this philosophy—observational—does not describe what kind of philosophy it is, but what it is about. Observation (from the Latin *observatio*) is its subject, not its method; here it is an ontological concept, not an epistemological one.[34]

The biggest challenge, thus, in developing observational philosophy is what Piatigorsky refers to as the intrinsic duality of its subject matter, or that "it observes everything (that is all objects, that it wants to and is able to observe) *as* thinking at the same time that we ascribe to thinking, *apriori*, a fixed status through reflection, as an epiphenomenon of reflection."[35] Maxim Mirosnichenko has

30 Ibid., p. 3.
31 Ibid., p. 3.
32 Ibid., p. 11.
33 Ibid., p. 8.
34 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
35 Ibid., p. 54.

likened Piatigorsky's observational philosophy in this regard to the philosophy of enactivism, in that "it preserves and maintains the distinction between the system and its environment in the eyes of the observer.[36] For Piatigorsky, thinking is the "place" that hosts the observation process; it is a meeting point with the observed and therefore does not belong strictly to the observer.[37]

Piatigorsky's emphasis on Buddhist insights into thinking adds an additional dimension to the formulation of this problem. Buddhist philosophers, he argues, have always understood that thinking comprises the foundation of *what is*; this idea comprises the foundation of observational philosophy.[38] Buddhist texts are rooted in a fundamental awareness of thinking and consciousness—something that, as he laments, has been left out of the Western tradition, from Kant to Wittgenstein.[39] According to this view, one could quite productively skip the development of these ideas in Western thought altogether by instead returning directly to Buddhist texts.

Moreover, the transcendental position of Buddhist yoga further removes the distinction between author-text and thinker-thinking through a process by which "yogic thinking is one, i.e., here it is completely irrelevant what it is, whose it is, or what it is about."[40] Buddhist texts, aside from any religious or cultural significance, are for Piatigorsky rich and apprehensible texts of thinking—they are moments of confluence between thinker, thinking, and that which is thought. Importantly, here we should take note that Piatigorsky has an expansive notion of text; Denis Korablin, for instance, highlights that not only does Piatigorsky interpret dharma as text, but that dharma is itself both text and factors in the generation of text.[41] In this way, the yoga teacher functions, in Piatigorsky's words, as "an expert on states of mind who knows how to 'read' a student's thinking (as well as his own) in the 'language' of these states."[42] The verb "to read" (*chitat'*) here is important, because it further grounds Piatigorsky's theory of observational philosophy as a method for learning "to read" thinking, both our own thinking and texts of the thinking of others.

An important contribution in this area concerns Piatigorsky's approach to moments where thinking and text meet, or more precisely, where thinking can be apprehended in—and then interpreted from—text. In the English draft of the manuscript for *Thinking and Observation*, he argues that any text

36 Maxim Mirosnichenko, "'None's Reflex': Enactivism and Observational Philosophy on Consciousness and Observation," *Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences* 63:4 (2020), p. 57.

37 Piatigorsky, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought* (London: Curzon Press, 1984), p. 17.

38 Ibid., p. 53. Emphasis in original.

39 Ibid., pp. 3–4.

40 Ibid., p. 52.

41 D. A. Korablin, "Nekotorye zamechaniia o poniatii 'dkharma' kak metanarrative buddiiskoi filosofskoi mysli," *Nauka o cheloveke: gumanitarnye issledovaniia* (2015), p. 31.

42 Piatigorskii, *Myshlenie i nabliudenie,* p. 22.

can be interpreted as a "text of thinking," thereby blending the philological and phenomenological modes. He notes that there exists a "synchronic" relationship between the objects of thinking and thinking itself, although this idea remains underdeveloped in his work.[43] Important for our purposes here is the fact that textual analysis is likened to the process of analyzing thinking, as we see, for instance, in Piatigorsky's literary analysis of the "dynamism" of Nabokov's literary worlds "of things"[44] or the connection of Tolstoy's work to Buddhist metaphysics of consciousness.[45] Text is the way that the thinking of one person can connect with the thinking of another, and that it becomes "legible as a fully-fledged object of observation" to another, meaning that text helps us come to know the thinking of others, both in our own times and those separated from us by history.[46]

Buddhism as Object and Approach

As we have seen above, Piatigorsky highlights how the very problem of the duality of thinking was in fact an insight discovered and documented by early Buddhist philosophers. And yet, a question remains as to the status of Buddhism in Piatigorsky's work. In *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought*, he summarizes his own position as such: "I try here only to understand the Buddhist theory of thought and consciousness as an actual and presently relevant example of philosophical thinking on thinking."[47] But what does this mean for the status of Buddhist texts in his work?

First, Piatigorsky notes that there is no one unified philosophical view on Buddhism. The Buddhist theory of consciousness is one of difference and not unity, he argues, and to limit Buddhist thought to any artificial unity or general theory would "neglect not so much some of the 'glorious contradictions' within the Buddhist Philosophy, as some far less glorious and much more essential differences between Adhidhamma and the Suttas."[48] Second, he notes that Buddhism is not limited to any strict notion of philosophy as a discipline. As he put it in "Five Lectures on Buddhist Philosophy" ("Piat' lektsii po buddiiskoi filosofii") from 1998: "Allow me to remind you that Buddhism goes far beyond what we, and to some extent the Buddhist teachers of earlier times themselves,

43 Alexander Piatigorsky, *Thinking and Observation* (Four Lectures on Observational Psychology), https://alexanderpiatigorsky.com/texts/books/philosophical-and-buddhologist-books/thinking-and-observation/lecture-1-manuscript/, p. 21, last accessed 15 May 2024.

44 Alexander Piatigorsky, "A Word About the Philosophy of Vladimir Nabokov," *Weiner Slawistischer Almanach* 4 (1979), p. 8.

45 Aleksandr Piatirogskii, "Tolstovskaia traktovka buddizma," pp. 251–255.

46 Piatigorsky, *Thinking and Observation,* p. 19.

47 Piatigorsky, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought,* p. 1.

48 Ibid., p. 8.

call philosophy."[49] Even as early as *Materials on the History of Indian Philosophy* from 1962, as we have seen, Piatigorsky argues that insights from Buddhist texts do not conform to the expected language or categories of traditional philosophical research.

Here it is important to note that Piatigorsky further distinguishes between Buddhism (religion, culture, art) and Buddhist philosophy, highlighting that Buddhist philosophy arises at the moment when its interpreters begin reflecting upon it as an idea—when people begin reflecting on their own thinking about it.[50] While in *Materials on the History of Indian Philosophy* Piatigorsky engages in textual analysis, in later works like *Thinking and Observation* he does not cite directly from texts but focuses on the confluence of Buddhist thought and reflection on that thought—in other words, Buddhist philosophy as the act of thinking about, and together with, Buddhist thought.[51]

In this way, Buddhism in Piatigorsky's work is both an object of scholarly analysis and an approach of thinking *about* that tradition. He expands his focus from the specifics of Buddhist texts to the states of mind and thought they can offer. In "Five Lectures on Buddhist Philosophy," he articulates this as the methodological distinction between speaking "about Buddhist philosophy" and "about Buddhism in general as philosophy."[52] Piatigorsky attributes a similar formulation to Dandaron: "In today's Russia, Dandaron managed to be at once a Buddhist scholar, a Buddhist philosopher, and a Buddhist yogi. This means it's possible."[53] Piatigorsky's work seems to attempt to achieve at least the first two of these categories, by merging the scholarly study of Buddhist texts with philosophy rooted in—and carried out through—a Buddhist approach. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Piatigorsky's approach to Buddhism forms a recursive reapplication of his view on the relationship between thinking and thinking about thinking. We see how his commitments to thinking and to Buddhist thought complement one another in both their philosophical and methodological dimensions, such that they can be productively layered upon each other in his work.

Yogic Analysis of Literature

We have seen how, for Piatigorsky, Buddhist texts offer a model for thinking about thinking. In the first lecture of *Thinking and Observation*, he engages

49 Aleksandr Piatigorskii, *Piat' lektsii po buddiiskoi filosofii*, https://alexanderpiatigorsky.com/ru/teksty/knigi/filosofskie-i-buddologicheskie-knigi/pyat-lekcij-po-buddistskoj-filosofii/izdannyiy-tekst/lekciya-2/, last accessed 15 May 2024.

50 Aleksandr Piatigorskii, *Filosofiia Buddizma*. Chast' 1 (June 29, 2010), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPgRYOY4cnA, last accessed 7 October 2024.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Piatigorskii, "Ukhod Dandarona."

the Sutra of Kāśyapaparivarta, which is part of the Ratnakuta Sutra and included in both the Tibetan and Chinese canons. Piatigorsky explicates the Buddha's reflection on how one can think about Nirvana, as the Buddha describes to a pupil that while it is nearly impossible to think about Nirvana, it is incomparably more difficult to think about that process of thinking. The Buddhist philosophy of thought, and in particular yogic forms of thinking, help attune us to reading mental states (both one's own and the mental states of others) and to think in the language of these states as a way to construct thinking that is, in itself, unthinkable by its very nature.[54] The objective state achieved through Buddhist yoga is one in which "the thinker not only thinks about themselves as another object, but thinks about themselves as another, located within that same 'state of mind' about whatever they think."[55] Piatigorsky categorized thinking into four positions that the thinker can take vis-à-vis objects of thought: α, β, γ, and δ objects. For Piatigorsky, γ objects in particular are those that are comprehended yogically by the mind. The γ position offers its own form of "yogic analysis" that decentralizes the human being: "In Buddhist philosophy as in observational philosophy," the 'human' and the 'I' are distinct *events* [*sluchai*] of thinking. But thinking itself is *not an event*."[56]

Yogic modes of thinking can also offer distinctive insights into the study of literature, as a literary text is synchronous with thinking in important ways. We cannot say that a specific page of a literary work is wrong or right, Piatigorsky argues. Rather, a literary work *just is*: it represents the author's vision for a character's *thinking* in the text.[57] When speaking about the genre of the novel, Piatigorsky describes it as a "universal text," whereas the study of the novel would be one further level removed: a "universal text about a text;" and philosophy—"a universal text about thinking."[58] In this case, the author's intentionality functions as an extra variable for the interpreter of any text. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the intentionality of the text may shift from the author to the protagonist, and in this case the protagonist becomes the author's "Other."[59]

While Piatigorsky's work on literature proposes a kind of phenomenology of text, he is clear about the differences between philosophy and philology proper. The object of philosophy, unlike philology or philological philosophy, is *non-text*: "Philosophy thinks about thinking as about a non-text; even if the latter is textual, its object is non-textual in the text. In relation to a text, thinking will, without fail, be defined, finished, and discrete in its 'acts' (the units of its

54 Piatigorsky, *Thinking and Observation*, p. 24.

55 Piatigorskii, *Myshlenie i nabliudenie,* p. 54.

56 Piatigorskii, "Ukhod Dandarona.," p. 52.

57 Piatigorsky, *Thinking and Observation,* p. 23.

58 Piatigorskii, "Kratkie zametki o filosofskom v ego otnoshenii k filologicheskomu," *Philologica* 3/4 (2) (1995), p. 11.

59 Piatigorsky, *Thinking and Observation,* p. 23.

segmentation, levels, etc.)."[60] Moreover, while the philologist studies concrete texts, the philosopher studies the world (or anything) as text. As Piatigorsky puts it, "philosophy does not have its own subject of study, insofar as its object—thinking—can include anything at all."[61]

Problems of Russian Culture

Russian philosophy, literature, or culture were never the primary subject areas of Piatigorsky's work. And yet, like many Russian-born thinkers of his generation, he was actively engaged in the emerging civil society of the late Soviet period, contributing to conversations on politics and culture in his more essayistic works. In "Philosophy of Literary Criticism," a paper he delivered in 1980 at the Second World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies, Piatigorsky interrogated the preeminent philosophical status of Russian [*russkii*] literature in Russian [*rossiiskii*] philosophical discourse. In her foundational study *Fiction's Overcoat* (2004), Edith Clowes argues that "Russian philosophy in its own original way emerged from the 'overcoat' of an already well-established literary culture that offered alternatives to systematic Western philosophy."[62] Three decades earlier, Piatigorsky offered his own answer to this enduring question. For Piatigorsky, literary criticism in Russia "functioned as philosophy, and philosophy served as the inner focus of literary criticism. They were so utterly intermingled in Russian culture as to be indistinguishable."[63] He continues: "Even when the separating out of professional philosophy began, even after a philosophy developed that had its own objects and methods, it could not immediately dispose of literature as its primary point of departure."[64] Upon first glance there might not seem to be any connection between Piatigorsky's Buddhist approach and his reflections on Russian philosophy. However, we can view his work on Buddhist texts as an attempt to offer a methodological alternative to the dominant philological-philosophical position of Russian literature, thereby offering Buddhist modes of thought as a "third position" for the investigation of philosophical thought in Russia more broadly. The methodological lessons of Buddhist thought, in other words, might help Russian thought to see itself more clearly.

For Piatigorsky, the philosophical status of literature in Russia has led to at least three interconnected problems that persist today in Russian culture. The first is that, in elevating literary texts so highly, and with so much authority,

60 Piatigorskii, "Kratkie zametki," p. 130.

61 Ibid., p. 130.

62 Edith Clowes, *Fiction's Overcoat: Russian Literary Culture and the Question of Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 5.

63 Alexander Piatigorsky, "Philosophy of Literary Criticism," *Selected Papers from the Second World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies* (1980), p. 238.

64 Ibid., p. 238.

they began to take on *metaphysical* weight. The second is that the focus on literature has led to an overwhelming *subjectivism* among Russian thinkers, which Piatigorsky defines as the inability of Russian writers to detach themselves from their own culture, "from considering it as the only and unique one," and to reflect on their own perspective as forming *a* cultural position rather than *the* position.[65] Thirdly, Piatigorsky highlights the problem of *literariness* in Russian culture, or the treatment of literary characters as the bearer of ideas rather than protagonists in a story. He argues that the Russian cultural tendency to view philosophical concepts as embodied by individuals, both real and fictional, is "a method whose very character has been predetermined by the 'personalism' of Russian culture as reflected and transformed through literature."[66] Moreover, Piatigorsky was critical of the Russian tendency towards *historiosophy*, or the impulse to identify "objective historical content" and to deploy historical narrative as argument within religious philosophy.[67] In his words: "Russian philosophy was discovering Russian history in the literary texts, appropriating and 'fixing' them as its own object."[68]

These and other tendencies contribute to what Piatigorsky sees as a serious methodological problem within the discipline of Russian philosophy—what he calls "an erratic mixture of ethical, esthetic, and metaphysical criteria."[69] This has limited Russian thought to return repeatedly to the same texts and authors (most notably, to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy), forming a sort of cultural echo chamber that allows not for progression, but only for the repetition and confirmation of ideas and the reproduction of the same historical and cultural narratives. In the context of his work on religion and culture, he also warns of the danger of talking about national cultures as "longstanding ontologized objects, about which there can be no debate."[70] In his view, there are no "Russian philosophers" in any essential sense—only philosophers who happened to be born in Russia.[71] Piatigorsky's ideas can offer contemporary scholars a framework for conceptualizing the post-invasion moment in Russian culture and philosophy, including theorizing a way forward for a field that has long been preoccupied with notions of "national" and "essential" qualities of Russian thought.

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65 Ibid., p. 241.

66 Ibid., p. 241.

67 I write about historiosophy in the context of Russian philosophy in Alyssa DeBlasio, *The End of Russian Philosophy: Tradition and Transition at the Turn of the 21th Century* (London: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 73–80.

68 Piatigorsky, "Philosophy of Literary Criticism" p. 242.

69 Ibid., p. 241.

70 Aleksandr Piatigorskii, "Neskol'ko slov ob izuchenii religii," Special issue on "Structure and Tradition in Russia Society," edited by Robert Reid, Joe Andrew, and Valentina Rolukhina, *Slavica Helsingiensia* 14 (1994), p. 117.

71 Piatigorskii, *Lektsii po filosofii. Vvedenie*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dA1axz-6vU, last accessed 7 October 2024.

In his rejection of national philosophies and essentializing narratives, Piatigorsky here again takes inspiration from Dandaron, who understood Buddhist thought in all its dimensions—cultural, spiritual, and philosophical, as well as in the universality of its experience and application, traversing traditional distinctions between east and west. On this element of Dandaron's thought, Piatigorsky wrote that

> it was Dandaron, who was so closely connected with the ancient traditional soil of northern Buddhism, who argued that Buddhism has *no place*, just as it has *no time* or epoch, and that Buddhism wanders, knowing no peoples, countries, or climates, no renaissances or decadences, no societies or social groups. This does not mean that Buddhism denies all this: Buddhism denies nothing. This only means that Buddhism *does not know this*, that this is not among its concerns.[72]

Piatigorsky's writing on the universality of Dandaron's message and the dangers of Russian exceptionalism are acutely contemporary more than forty years later. His work offers a path forward and a path backwards, both of which lead to Buddhism—not as a concrete tradition, but as a way of thinking about thinking, in action, observation, and interpretation.

72 Piatigorskii, "Ukhod Dandarona."